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## MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Date: December 10, 1976

Place: United States Embassy, Buenos Aires

Participants: Mr. John Delbert Erb, Representative of  
Mennonite Church in Argentina (U.S. Citizen)  
Mr. Charles W. Bray, Deputy Assistant Secretary A  
Ms. Yvonne Thayer, Political Officer, American  
Embassy  
Mr. Gerald J. Whitman, Consular Officer,  
American Embassy

I told Mr. Erb that I had spoken with representatives of different groups in Argentina in an effort to acquire a feeling for the economic, political and security situation here. I was now approaching him, as the representative of the Mennonite Church in Buenos Aires and as the father of a United States citizen (Patricia Erb) who had been abducted and eventually released by the Argentine authorities, to seek his opinions in these areas.

Mr. Erb stated that the main problem in Argentina today was the deterioration of the economic position of the "man in the street"; that the process was not attributable to the military government, but had been going on for many years under several governments. Most people still like to live in Argentina. Incidents of crime are low. People still frequent theaters and restaurants and a care-free attitude is prevalent. The lives of most people are not affected by the security measures of the military government because they have little reason to come in contact with these forces.

When asked what actions the United States Government should take to improve the human rights situation here, Mr. Erb replied that, although the problem in Argentina is created in part by the GOA, it is mainly caused by basic social injustices that exist in the society. The U.S. Government, rather than exerting public pressure on the GOA, should direct its efforts toward eliminating these injustices. For example the U.S. could help Argentina increase its

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ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

☒ Release ☐ Excise ☐ Deny

Exemption(s):

Declassify: ☐ In Part ☒ In Full☐ Classify as ☐ Extend as ☐ Downgrade to

Date \_\_\_\_\_ Declassify on \_\_\_\_\_ Reason \_\_\_\_\_

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agricultural output and help improve health and educational facilities. A program to improve schools in the poor rural areas and increase administrative efficiency would be beneficial. Health facilities in the northern provinces are particularly bad and conditions are exacerbated by widespread graft and stealing by doctors and nurses on the hospital staffs. On the other hand, U.S. Government programs providing military training and CIA activity assisting Argentine intelligence agencies in counter-terrorism should be stopped. Mr. Erb did not think the GOA would respond favorably to U.S. pressure on human rights.

I relayed to Mr. Erb the contents of the telephone conversation between Fred Rondon and Delton Franz as to whether or not Patricia Erb should make a statement regarding her detention. I stated that Patricia's decision is hers alone, as we see it, but offered to pass on any thoughts Mr. Erb had on the subject in view of the uncertainty of communication through the open mail. He said that he had suggested to the Mennonite Mission Board that if Patricia wanted to make a statement, it should be made through Amnesty International or a church group without identifying Patricia as the source. If Patricia was made to sign a paper promising to make no statements regarding her imprisonment as a condition of her release, then she must follow her conscience as to whether making such a statement now would be morally honest. Patricia felt, however, that she also has a moral Christian obligation to help the other people imprisoned with her. While she was at Villa Devoto she gave the names she memorized at Campo de Mayo to her fellow inmates and the word eventually got back to their families. Mr. Erb is skeptical as to whether a statement made now, more than two months after her release, would have a beneficial effect. He said that such a statement, on the contrary, could adversely affect the safety of his family and might involve the Mennonite Church in a case they had nothing to do with.

I told Mr. Erb that Patricia had forbidden us to make a formal protest to the Argentine Government regarding her detention and that only she could decide otherwise. Nevertheless if Patricia were to make a statement (to Amnesty International, for example) what would be Mr. Erb's reaction to a formal protest? Such a protest would be based upon: (1) violation of the Vienna Convention in holding Patricia incommunicado without consular access, and (2) mistreatment while detained. Its purpose would be to impress upon the Government or Argentina its legal obligation to provide consular access and good treatment and could have the effect of making the GOA more sensitive to these areas in the future.

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Mr. Erb was skeptical that a protest would produce any change in the GOA's behavior. The system of clandestine abductions and torture to gain intelligence was set up to evade the already established legal process. Unless the GOA decided to dismantle the entire system, the protest would have no effect. I told Mr. Erb that if his daughter consented to a formal protest to the GOA, we would consult again with him before proceeding, since his interests, too, were involved.

In closing, Mr. Erb stated that he believed that innocent people are caught up in police and military actions against terrorists but that an effort is made to separate the innocent from the guilty and provide for their eventual release.

Gerald J. Whitman, Cons. /pm  
December 10, 1976

Cleared by Mr. Bray (in draft)

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